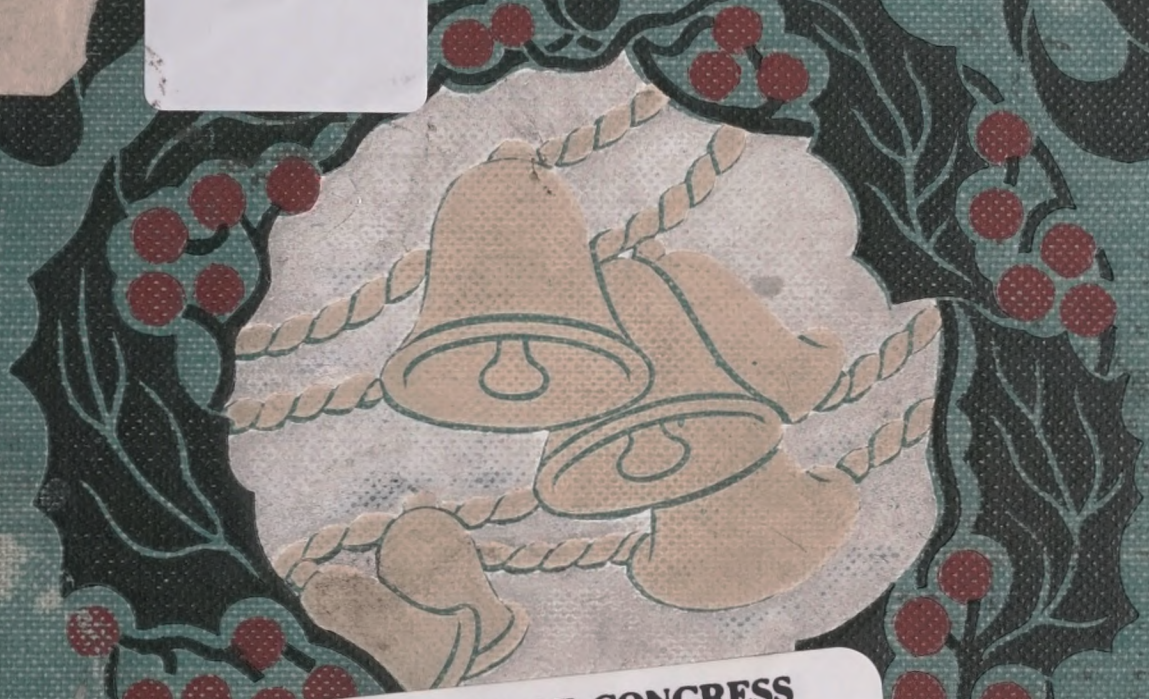
THE TRUTH About SANTA CLAUS



PZ
7
.V193
Tr

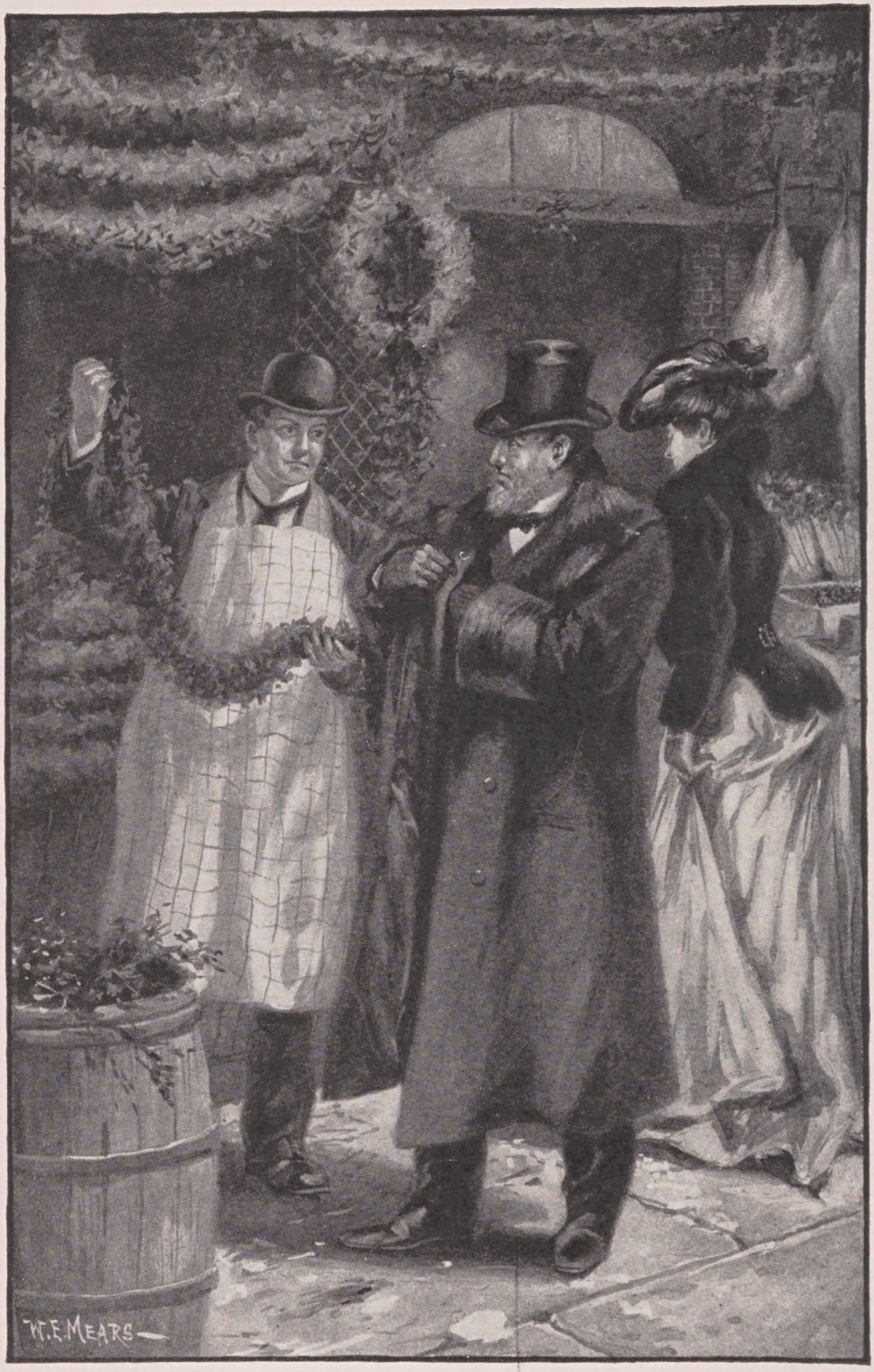
FT MEADE
GenColl

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
00004688016

CHARLOTTE M. VAILE

Class PZ7
Book .V193
Copyright No. Tr

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.



"YOU 'VE SEEN THIS KIND OF EVERGREEN GROWING THERE YOURSELF."

The TRUTH ABOUT SANTA CLAUS

by CHARLOTTE M. VAILE

Author of "TWO AND ONE"

NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL & CO.
PUBLISHERS

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS,
Two Copies Received
AUG 11 1903
Copyright Entry
Aug. 12-1903
CLASS a XXc. No.
66240
COPY B.

PZ 7
.V193
Tr

Copyright, 1903,
By Thomas Y. Crowell & Company.

Published September, 1903.

SMITHSONIAN
INSTITUTION

THE TRUTH ABOUT SANTA CLAUS.

It was such a pretty story, — that story of the merry old gentleman dashing about the world on Christmas Eve with a team of prancing reindeer and a sleighful of presents, — that the real Santa Claus had never cared to dispute it. Indeed, he enjoyed it as much as any one, and he often laughed softly to himself as he heard the children telling it over, and saw pictures of the jolly old saint disappearing down a chimney, with a twinkle in his eyes and a pack on his back. To tell the truth, nothing could have been farther from the facts in the case. He had never carried a pack or

gone down a chimney in his life, and as for driving a four-in-hand of reindeer, he would not have known how to manage them if the gentlest team in all the North Pole region had been put under his hand; while, as for being old, why, bless you, he was a child himself, the most beautiful child in the world, with a face that could no more grow old than sunrise over the mountains, or starlight in the summer sky.

It would have put an end to all these mistakes, of course, if a true picture of him had ever been taken, but the trouble was he always wore an invisible cloak when he went on his errands. It was the same kind of cloak that the old heroes used to wear, Perseus and the rest, when they went about fighting dragons and killing the wicked giants; and the wings on his feet must have been for all the world like the pair that Quicksilver wore

on his nimble heels in the doings you have read of in the dear old Wonder Book.

Oh, there were strange things in plenty about the real Santa Claus, but the strangest of all was the way he managed his Christmas business. Not that there was anything so very remarkable in the scheme: *that* was simply — since he could not possibly do all the work himself — to impress other people into the service and make them his special agents. But the curious part of the business was this, that if once a person really began to work for Santa Claus he could never stop, he had to do more and more, he liked nothing else in the world so well, and the dear sly Santa Claus knew it. The only trouble was to get people started, and how he managed this was his own secret, but if once he could get close to them, close enough to whisper a word in their ears,

to look for a moment into their eyes, and lay his small, soft hand on theirs, it was all over with them. Before they knew what had happened there would come a strange warm feeling at their hearts and the Christmas spirit was having its own way with them.

"I shall have them all in the end, every one," he said to himself one day — it was the day before Christmas — as he stood at the crossing of two crowded streets in a big busy city. Then he sighed just the faintest of sighs, to think how many there were still to be won, and how hard, how very hard it was to get hold of some of them.

He was a trifle tired just then, for he had been following for half a dozen blocks a portly gentleman, who walked with his hands in his pockets and his head sunk in the collar of his great fur coat, without being able to get close to him, and this

was always the hardest kind of business for the real Santa Claus. It was not the question of catching up with people, you understand — why, with those wings on his heels he could have put a girdle round the world in forty minutes, like Puck himself, but there was a sort of atmosphere in which some people wrapped themselves through which he could never penetrate. It was as thin and fine as his own invisible cloak, but cold, so cold that the chill of it took his breath away and kept him at arm's length, as if an iron hand had thrust him back.

The atmosphere around this portly gentleman was one of the coldest he had ever encountered, and Santa Claus gave himself a brisk little shake by way of getting warm again, as he stood looking after him at the crossing. He had not given up the chase for good, — of course not, — but he was too busy to go on with

it now, and then he smiled as he thought of a man named Scrooge, and what a work he had, once on a time, before he caught him. It had paid — dear, dear, how it had paid! — and what a worker for Santa Claus he had made in the end, that same old Scrooge, with Bob Cratchit and the little Cratchits, and tiny Tim, and a lot of other people — God bless them, every one! — all the happier for the good cheer he put into their Christmas.

So the wise little Santa Claus smiled to himself now and sent a nod after the portly gentleman as much as to say, "I shall catch up with you some day yet, and grip you hard, my fine fellow," and then he stopped thinking about him and looked sharply around to see what he should do next.

Now it happened that Dick Daly, a boot-black, was passing at that moment, and Dick was not looking happy. It

was a dull day in his business. People did not seem to care whether their shoes were polished or not, they were so busy hurrying up and down with Christmas errands, and even old customers whose attention was called to the dull state of their foot-wear by Dick's persuasive, "Shine, sir, have a shine?" went by him without stopping.

"Hang it all," he was saying to himself dejectedly, "it's the worst time in the year for business. A fellow's got no sort of show on the day before Christmas."

"There are plenty of fellows worse off than you are," said Santa Claus giving him a nudge (he had not the least trouble in getting close to Dick). "Look at that little chap coming across the street. You'd think he hadn't a friend in the world and never saw a nickel."

It was certainly a sorry-looking waif who was coming towards them just then.

Dick, who knew most of the street Arabs in this part of town, did not remember ever seeing him before, and his sharp bright eyes went over him in a twinkling. He was not so very ragged nor dreadfully dirty, but he looked so little and pinched, and his face had such a disconsolate pucker in it, that Dick, who had as much curiosity as a Mongoose, gave a low whistle and decided to find out what was the matter with him.

"Hullo, little one!" he said cheerfully as he drew a step nearer. "Out buying Christmas presents? You don't exactly look as if you 'd struck anything that suited you."

The child stared stupidly at Dick. He did not understand this kind of greeting.

"Maybe you don't know where to get 'em," pursued Dick, dropping into a confidential tone. "Come now, I 'll give you some points and not charge any commis-

sion. Gold watches and diamond rings selling out for cost at Hubbell's. First class suits of clothes, jackets and trousers, all wool and a yard wide, going for a song at Howler's, and everything to set you up in housekeeping at your own price right round the corner here at the Emporium. Guess you 're kind of a Tenderfoot, ain't you? Have n't got onto things in our town very well yet."

The child, who had looked more stupid than ever during part of this speech, seemed to gather some meaning from the last words.

"No," he said sorrowfully, "we 've only been here a fortnight."

"Oh," said Dick, the mocking tone dropping out of his voice. "It 's a streak of homesickness that 's struck you, is it? Well, that 's bad, but 't wont kill you. It 's jolly here when you get used to it,

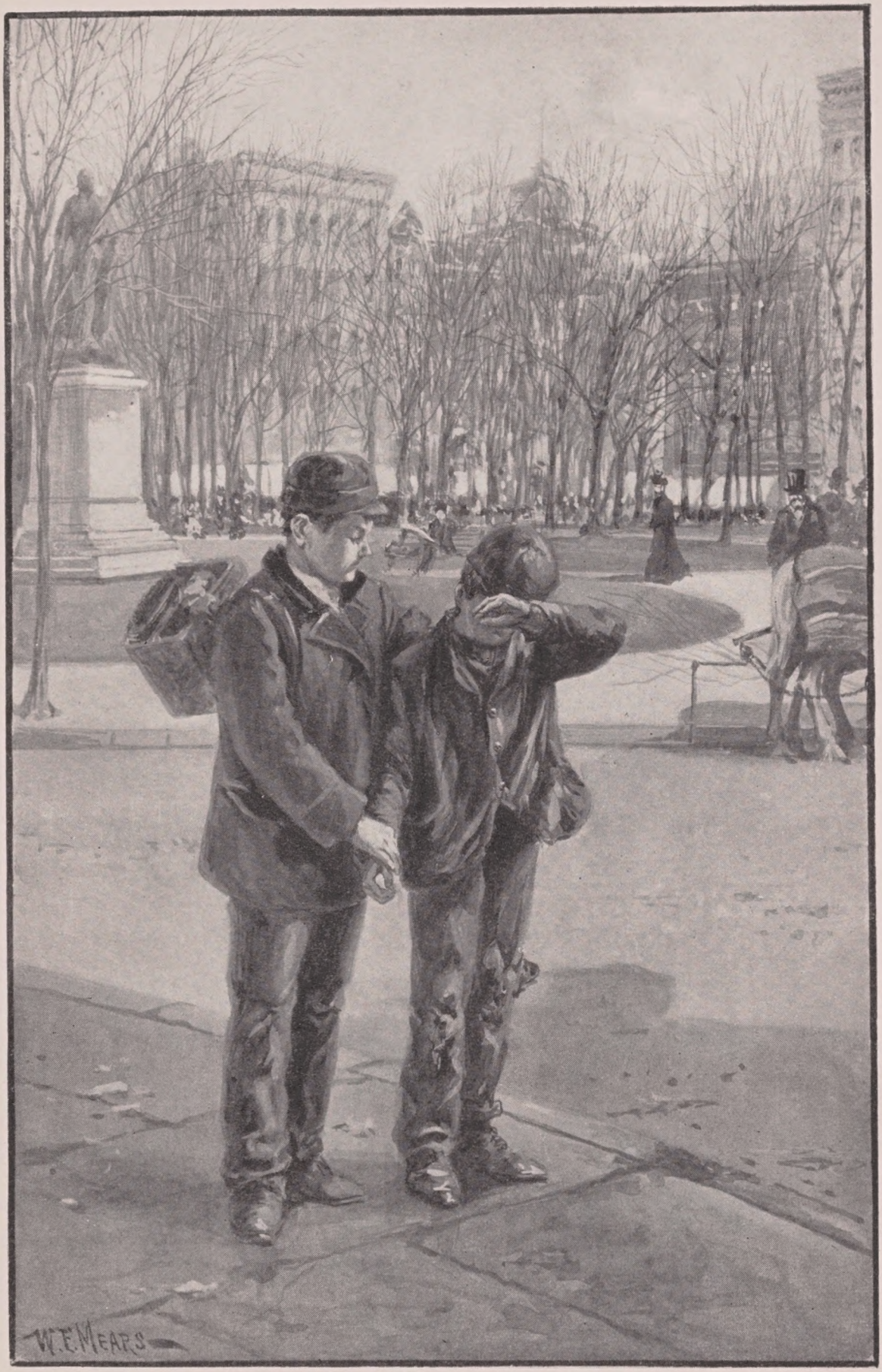
only *'t is* sort of hard on a fellow starting in just at Christmas."

It was easy enough to understand this and the kind look in Dick's eyes. The child sidled up a little closer.

"Yes," he said, "it 's awful hard. You see, father 's sick. He coughs terrible bad, and they thought he might get better if he came out here, but it seems like he 's worse than ever, and the money 's most gone, and mother can't get any work, and she and granny cry most all the time."

He drew his sleeve across his eyes and began to cry a little himself as he ended.

"Whew!" said Dick, "that 's piling things up!" And then he added quite sternly, "But it 's no use turning on the water-works; might freeze in this cold weather and bust things generally, you know. I tell you, folks have got to keep



HE DREW HIS SLEEVE ACROSS HIS EYES AND BEGAN TO CRY.

a stiff upper lip when they 're down on their luck or it 's all over with 'em."

The child swallowed hard, and Dick's lip, which he was trying to hold particularly stiff, softened.

"But say," he went on, "I would n't worry about your father — not yet awhile. Why, I 've seen folks so near gone you would n't know 'em from dead when they came out here, and in a little while they picked up and were as lively as jack-rabbits. Just give him time, sonny, give him time. And about your mother not getting work" — he gave the child a wink — "I would n't fret about that either if I was you. A month from now she and your granny may have so much to do that you 'll have to stay at home to take care of the baby."

The child began to smile. He wondered how Dick knew there was a baby, and would have asked him, if Dick, who

could not think of anything more to say in the line of comfort, had not exclaimed just then (the face of the invisible Santa Claus was close at his ear):

"Look here, don't you want me to give you a shine? It 's right in my line and I don't happen to be rushed just this minute."

He gave the little fellow a good-natured push against the building behind them as he spoke, then, lowering his box to the sidewalk, began flourishing his brush in his most professional manner.

The child's face grew quite excited. "Why, I never had my shoes blacked this way before," he gasped.

"I should think not. Judging from the color of 'em I should say the boot-blacks must all have been out on a strike back where you came from," said Dick dryly.

He had stopped flourishing his brush and was looking from the shoes to the boy

and from the boy to the shoes again with his most whimsical expression. It was not the color of the shoes (though they were red as an old stove-pipe) which struck him most. The size of them was even more impressive. They were large enough for a man, a tall man at that, and if the strings had not been wound tightly around the thin little ankles above them, it really seemed as if they must have fallen from the child's feet when he tried to lift them. Dick had a momentary struggle with his professional sense that a customer's taste in shoes was not to be questioned; then he gave it up.

"I say, kid," he burst out, "what are you towing these gun-boats round for? They 'll run away with you before you know it."

"They 're pap's," said the child, flushing. "He said I might wear 'em, cause mine are all worn out, and I 've had to stay

in the house all the week. But they ain't so loose for me as you 'd think," he added eagerly, "'cause I got the chilblains so bad wearing the old ones that my feet are all swelled up and they take up lots of o' room."

There was something in this that Dick liked.

"Come, now, that 's the way to talk," he said, in a tone of distinct approval. "Keep it right up. You 'll make a soldier yet."

And then he fell to blacking and polishing those shoes as if he felt that here was the opportunity of his life for producing a masterpiece. But presently the brush began to move more slowly and Dick's lips shaped themselves into that peculiar pucker which always came when he was thinking deeply.

Now Dick was one of the thriftiest of the boot-blacks. Some of his comrades

called it luck — the fact that he always managed to get his share of the work when there was any work going, and that he generally contrived to keep a little money in his pocket instead of being "dead broke," which was the usual state of most of them. Whether luck, or pluck mixed with a sort of sturdy good sense, was really the right name for it is not the point just now. The important thing is that a great idea had dawned suddenly upon Dick, and in spite of the slack time on which he had fallen in business he felt a strong inclination to carry it out. It would take money. But who counted money at Christmas? he said to himself, loftily. He was up on his dues at the lodgings, and, counting the three nickels he had taken in as the result of his morning's work, he actually possessed one dollar and a half, most of which he had meant to "salt down" toward certain

schemes of his own; but over against them now had risen the fact that the little chap in the dreadful brogans needed a new pair of shoes. That without them he must stay in-doors, where a man was coughing and women were crying, instead of being out with other boys, went to Dick's heart. No wonder the poor child looked ill and homesick. The rate at which the brush was moving quickened; the pucker went out of Dick's mouth and his eyes grew bright and eager.

"There!" he exclaimed, looking up from the shoes after a last onset of polishing. "Take your daddy that shine as a Christmas present. Tell him I send it with my compliments. And say, if you have n't got anything pressing just now, s'pose you come round with me to Donovan Street. There 's a shoe-store there that I want to look into."

The child had apparently no suspicion

of Dick's plan, but he looked pleased with the invitation.

"I should like to go," he said, eagerly.

"Fact is," said Dick, dropping into his most waggish tone, "I've got a curiosity to see what size of shoes you really wear, and I'm afraid it'll keep me awake to-night if I don't find out."

The child began to stare. "Do you mean you're going to *get* me a pair?" he asked slowly.

"That's about it, sonny," said Dick, and then he burst out laughing at the child's solemn face. "I know it's a little hard on a body when he's carrying round as much shine as you are to come down to about a quarter of it all at one jump, but your daddy might want his shoes, you know, to take a walk in this evening, and 't would be safer for you to have a pair of your own."

The child made no reply, but a radiant

look came into his face. He dropped behind Dick and followed at his heels like a spaniel.

There was a special sale going on at Bruce and Butler's "Great Shoe Palace" on Donovan Street. A flaming card in the window assured passers-by that shoes were not only going at prices which knocked the bottom out of the trade at every other place in the city, but that actually a ticket for the handsome rosewood piano standing at the front of the store would be given away with every dollar purchase. Dick was too shrewd not to have his own opinion as to the exceptional cheapness of goods sold with such a bonus, but he knew Bruce and Butler of old, and he had confidence in a certain style of dollar and a half shoes which was always to be found at this place. So he led his new protégé down the length of the store, placed him on a

comfortable seat and marched up to the counter with the air of one who knows his business exactly.

"Show me a pair of shoes for that little chap over there," he said to the clerk who stepped briskly forward. "Straight goat with good thick soles — kind you sell to us fellows for a dollar and a half."

He was very much on his dignity while the clerk produced the desired sort, and seating himself before his small customer proceeded to take off the pair which had just been polished so handsomely.

"Thought you would n't wait to grow up to these, did you, Bubby? Well, I would n't if I was you. Life 's too uncertain," remarked the clerk with a wink, first at the child and then at Dick.

But Dick did not encourage this jocosity. He had quite the air of a parent out clothing his family.

"Queer how these little chaps are

always wanting to stand in older folks' shoes," he remarked, as if by way of explanation. "I always like to encourage 'em up to a certain point. But it won't do to let 'em carry it too far, not too far, you know, even at Christmas."

It did not take long to do the business. A few minutes and the poor little chilblained feet were clothed in a strong, new pair of shoes, altogether neat and respectable. Dick's pocket was light, but so was his heart, so what did it matter? He was turning away when the clerk called after him.

"Here 's your ticket to the piano. Better take it, there 's no telling where lightning may strike," he said, holding out a bit of pasteboard.

Dick pocketed it with a laugh. "I 'll give that piano to my best girl if I get it," he said; then, turning to the child, "Come on, let 's see what it looks like."

He had been so absorbed in his errand when he entered the store that he had hardly noticed the piano, but he walked towards it now with a face full of interest. A young lady was playing, and a number of people were standing about listening to the music. It was good music, for the piano was really a nice one, and the young lady whose fingers moved so deftly over the keys was an excellent performer. But she looked tired, dreadfully tired. She had been playing for hours — it was part of the advertisement and she was paid for doing it, but the music had lost all meaning in her own ears. She had a feeling that she was turning into a machine, and if her two hands had suddenly shaped themselves into a crank it would hardly have surprised her. She was wondering how much longer she could keep it up, and whether the end would not be that she would play discords

without knowing it, when Dick and his protégé came up.

Now if there was one thing in the world that Dick Daly loved it was music. A hand-organ or a music-box could lure him away from business, and a brass band playing "Hail, Columbia," could simply make his heart too big for his jacket. He had bankrupted himself once buying a banjo, and every fellow at the lodging-house knew how he played it of evenings.

Perhaps it was the pleasure in his face which made the young lady's eyes find his the next time she looked up from the piano. He was whistling a soft accompaniment to the waltz she was playing and keeping time with his head to the beat of the music. The sense that somebody was really enjoying it made her face brighten and she gave him a friendly smile.

Dick returned it with interest and then

he came a step nearer. "Would you mind playing 'El Capitan'?" he said in his most persuasive tone. "It 's a great favorite of mine."

She struck into it in an instant and played the lively two-step in a manner that made it hard for Dick and several other people to keep their feet on the floor. Then she glided off into another of the Sousa's and followed it with a number of popular airs, weaving bright little variations of her own in and out as she played, and ended at length with a "Hot Time in the Old Town," done in a style which set Dick fairly beside himself with delight.

"Don't she beat the band, though?" he burst out to a staid-looking gentleman who was standing near him. Then, turning to the young lady herself, "I say! you 're a crackerjack at playing the piano."

A flush, partly of embarrassment, partly of pleasure, swept over the girl's face.

"Thank you," she said. "I 'm so glad you like it."

"*Like it!*" cried Dick, fervently. And then another idea, almost as bright as the one which had come to him so suddenly at the corner, popped into his head, and was out of his mouth before it had time to turn back.

"Look here, have you got a piano?"

"Not one of my own," said the girl, "but I rent one. I 'm a music teacher."

"Well, you ought to have this one," said Dick, with emphasis. "I 'll give you my ticket and I hope you 'll draw it."

Ticket number 2125 came out of his pocket as he spoke, and tears were in the young lady's eyes as she put out her hand to take it. They were great dark eyes, very soft and beautiful.

"Upon my word that 's not a bad idea,"

"WOULD YOU MIND PLAYING 'EL CAPITAN'?"

said a stylish-looking young man who was close by and saw it all. "Please take mine too, with my best wishes for your good luck," he added with a bow to the musician, and five more tickets went down on the piano.

Talk about measles being catching! There is nothing half so catching as a good, kind thought. It was astonishing how that one of Dick's spread, and how the people who were standing there all seemed to get it at once. They saw in an instant what a capital thing it was to do, and bits of pasteboard fell on the piano like a little shower of leaves. It was not the end of the shower either, for that story stayed in the store all day, and more than one customer who heard it lingered to listen to the music and decided to leave his tickets with the winsome little musician.

She was so overwhelmed at first that

she could not speak. Then she rose in her place, her dark eyes darker than before and her voice trembling very much.

"Thank you all," she said. "Whether I get the piano or not, it will always be a pleasure to me to think that so many of the people wanted I should have it."

A little later she said in a low voice to Dick, who somehow found it hard to tear himself away, "If I should get it I should owe it to you, and you must come round and let me play to you."

"Bet your life I'll do it," said Dick, and he pocketed her card in place of his ticket.

It is going outside of this story, and that is out of order of course, but Dick kept that promise a week later, and the music that came from the rose-wood piano was better than ever.

But we must get back to our dear little Santa Claus. You are not by any means

to suppose that he had been staying with Dick all this time. There was not the least need of that, for when once he had started him on the business of cheering up that sorry little lad at the crossing, all the rest followed as naturally as a snow-ball grows when you set it rolling.

In the half hour it had taken to do all this, Santa Claus had been busy with a dozen errands in as many different parts of town. He had dived into an office where all sorts of coal were for sale, and whispered to a pleasant looking gentleman, who was ordering some for his family, that a certain poor neighbor in his alley was very likely needing some too. He had taken a turn through the market and reminded a lady who was buying her Christmas turkey, that her washwoman had a dreadfully hard time to supply her children with plain bread and butter. He had brushed the shoulder of a sweet

young girl who stood at a street corner with a box of roses and put it into her mind to slip one of them into the hand of a little old woman who was passing just then. He had even given another two minutes to the portly gentleman with his head in the fur collar, and for an instant had really thought he was coming up with him, for the gentleman had stopped before a bulletin board and seemed much concerned over the report of a railroad accident, but the next moment he was wondering whether the loss involved would affect the dividends on that road, and with this the atmosphere about him grew so fearfully cold that the only thing Santa Claus could do was to make off as fast as possible.

Oh, it would take a story all by itself to tell one-quarter of the things he had been doing in this last half hour, but, at the particular moment when Dick, step-

ping as if he were still keeping time to music, walked out of the shoe store, with a child beside him who looked as if he had forgotten all the troubles of the world, he, Santa Claus, was walking arm-in-arm with a motherly-looking lady who was hurrying from one shop to another, fairly loaded down with parcels.

She was an old acquaintance of his. He had had her on his list of workers for years and years. For that matter (we might mention it in passing) he never had any trouble enlisting the mothers. Somehow they were in league with him from the minute the first baby slipped into their arms, but he liked to go about with them now and then just to see how they carried on his business.

The lady who was his companion now was looking a little down-hearted. The fact is, she was tired and worried, and she was actually saying to herself:

"Oh, dear, I wish there was n't quite so much of Christmas! It wears a body all out trying to think what to give to so many people. I don't mind the children; it 's just a pleasure to plan for them. But the grown-up folks that you feel as if you *must* give to — I declare it 's a regular bondage. It seems to me I shall never get through this year's list."

Now if there was anything that made the real Santa Claus feel like crying, it was to hear one of his own workers talk like this.

"What makes you give to those people, then, if it 's such a burden?" he asked, a little gruffly.

"Because — because," said the lady, who thought she was just musing with herself, "well, I suppose it 's because I know they 'll give to me, and then I should feel uncomfortable if I had n't given anything to them."

"Do you think that 's the right way to give Christmas presents?" whispered Santa Claus.

"No, I don't. It 's simply horrid," said the lady, promptly.

"And it is n't in the least what was meant when the angels sang together that night," he added softly.

"Oh, no, oh, no," said the lady.

"Then change the fashion, oh, change the fashion of it!" he pleaded. "Don't let Christmas grow into this sort of thing, this give-and-get-again, this debt-and-credit sort of business! It takes the very heart out of the day. It spoils the meaning of it. It is n't fair to Him — to Him who brought the peace and good-will — to change it from the beautiful thing He meant to one that is tiresome and selfish.

"Come, now," he went on, a lighter note coming into his voice as he saw that her lips were quivering. "How would it

do to change this Christmas bondage you 're talking about to Christmas liberty? Is n't there somebody you would n't dare to give a present to at any other time, whom you 'd like to remember to-morrow?"

The lady, who had been having all this talk with Santa Claus, suddenly stopped in her walk, and stood staring down at the pavement. It was a queer way of easing her mind from the burden of that list she had been groaning over to think up some more people to give to; but that is just what happened to her at that moment, and somehow her face began to brighten.

"Christmas liberty!" she repeated. "That 's the idea. Why did n't I think of it before? I declare, I believe I 'll send Jane Brewster's baby a pretty little sack. She could n't take offence at Christmas, and she 's been feeling edgewise towards

me ever since our boys had that quarrel. And there's Rob French, too proud to own that he needs anything, but scrimping and pinching to the last point to save money to go to school. I know something he really wants, and I'll steal a march on him in the morning. What's the good of Christmas, anyway, if it does n't give one the right to take a bit of liberty now and then?"

Santa Claus slipped his arm out of hers, and he laughed the sweetest laugh in the world, as he hurried away. What would become of that other list of people did not trouble him in the least; and somehow it had stopped troubling her. Perhaps she would find the trifles she wanted more easily because she had stopped being anxious; perhaps she would be content to send to some of the friends she loved only her greeting and a bit of holly in the Christmas morning.

"If only they'd all do like her!" said Santa Claus to himself, and it did not affect his wish in the least that he knew she had plenty of money, and there were many, many others who must look long and think carefully before they spent a dollar.

It was one of these others that he came upon at the very next corner, a plainly dressed young woman, who was waiting for a street car. She had done her Christmas shopping with a light purse, and there was nothing in it now but a car-fare.

"Oh, how many things one could do at Christmas to make people happy if he only had plenty of money!" she was saying wistfully to herself.

"There are lots of things one can do without having much money," said Santa Claus, pausing beside her.

"But they are such little things," sighed the girl.

"What do you know about little things and great ones?" said Santa Claus, scornfully. "If you 'd seen the world turn round as many times as I have, and watched the people in it, you 'd change your notions about some things. If I had to take my choice between a worker with a heavy purse and one with a ready smile, I 'd take the smiler every time," he added, making the last remark to himself.

The girl was reflecting on what he had said, and being a person who was really on the watch for chances, with eyes in the place where the Bible says the wise man carries his, she noticed just then a very dignified but shabbily dressed old gentleman, who was standing within a few feet of her, evidently hoping to catch an occasional customer for the shoestrings which hung from a frame about

his neck. He was not crying his wares at all, but he looked anxiously at the passers-by and fingered the strings with hands that were nervous and trembling.

The street car was long in coming, and the girl began to notice that of all the crowd of people surging up and down the street not one person stopped to make a purchase from the poor old vender.

"How discouraging it must be," she said, looking at the patient, pathetic figure. "Surely the old man must have had something better to do once than selling shoe-strings on the street."

"It does n't hurt anybody to take a good smart walk on a day like this," whispered Santa Claus. (The remark had an obvious bearing on that nickel in the young lady's pocket.)

"Of course it does n't," she said, giving herself a little shake; and she stepped briskly up to the old gentleman.

"How do you sell your shoe-strings?" she asked, in a pleasant voice.

"Two pair for five cents," said the vender, eagerly.

"Please give me two pairs," said the girl, and she added as she dropped the nickel into his hand, "It's a great convenience sometimes to be able to buy such things on the street. It's the sort that you are always forgetting when you are in the stores."

A look of surprise and pleasure swept across the man's face.

"Thank you," he said, and if the girl had not hurried away just then she would have noticed that he held his head higher than before and began timidly to call the attention of passers-by to his stock.

"There's a good five cents' worth of work," said Santa Claus, and he smiled to himself, remembering what the lady had said about little things. Then, not

caring in the least whether little things or great (as people name them) fell in his own way, he made a sudden dash into an alley and stood for a minute looking up at a window which had caught his eye as he turned about.

There was a face at the window, a child's face, with big blue eyes and yellow hair falling across the forehead. It was a beautiful face, but that was not what made Santa Claus stop to look at it. It was the wistful expression in the eyes, and the sight of something on which the child leaned as she stood by the window. It was a little wooden crutch, as he knew in an instant, and his own eyes took a wistful look, as he said under his breath:

"Poor thing, she 's shut up there in that room when she wants to be out in the sunshine, seeing the Christmas doings like other children."

Perhaps she might have gone if there had been any one to take her, but the woman who sat in a chair near by had her head bent low over a piece of sewing, and saw nothing else.

"If I could send somebody up there with a bit of Christmas cheer!" said Santa Claus; and then he glanced up and down the alley in his quick, sharp way, to see who there was that could be impressed into the service.

But the people in the alley were hurrying through to the street; and, indeed, it would not have been easy to invent an errand which should take a chance passer-by up to that room with the window. For a minute Santa Claus looked a little puzzled. Then, all at once, a bright idea came into his head, and in a twinkling he had found a way.

Now to understand what it was, you must know that this real Santa Claus of

ours is not at all limited to men and women for helpers in his Christmas business. He has a fashion of setting any creature at work for him that comes in his way, and that has the least liking for being helpful to others. Many a time he has sent a faithful dog, or a soft, purring kitten, on one of his errands, and as for a bird with a song, there is really nobody that he likes much better, unless it may be a child with a loving face and a happy laugh.

It happened, at the very moment when he was beginning to look puzzled, that a flock of little brown birds came fluttering into the alley. They had no songs to speak of, and not much color, though you might catch a hint of pink when their wings were lifted, and there was one of them that had the dearest little rosy spot on the top of his head.

"They 're just in the nick of time,"

said Santa Claus to himself. "I'll have them take a turn up to that window."

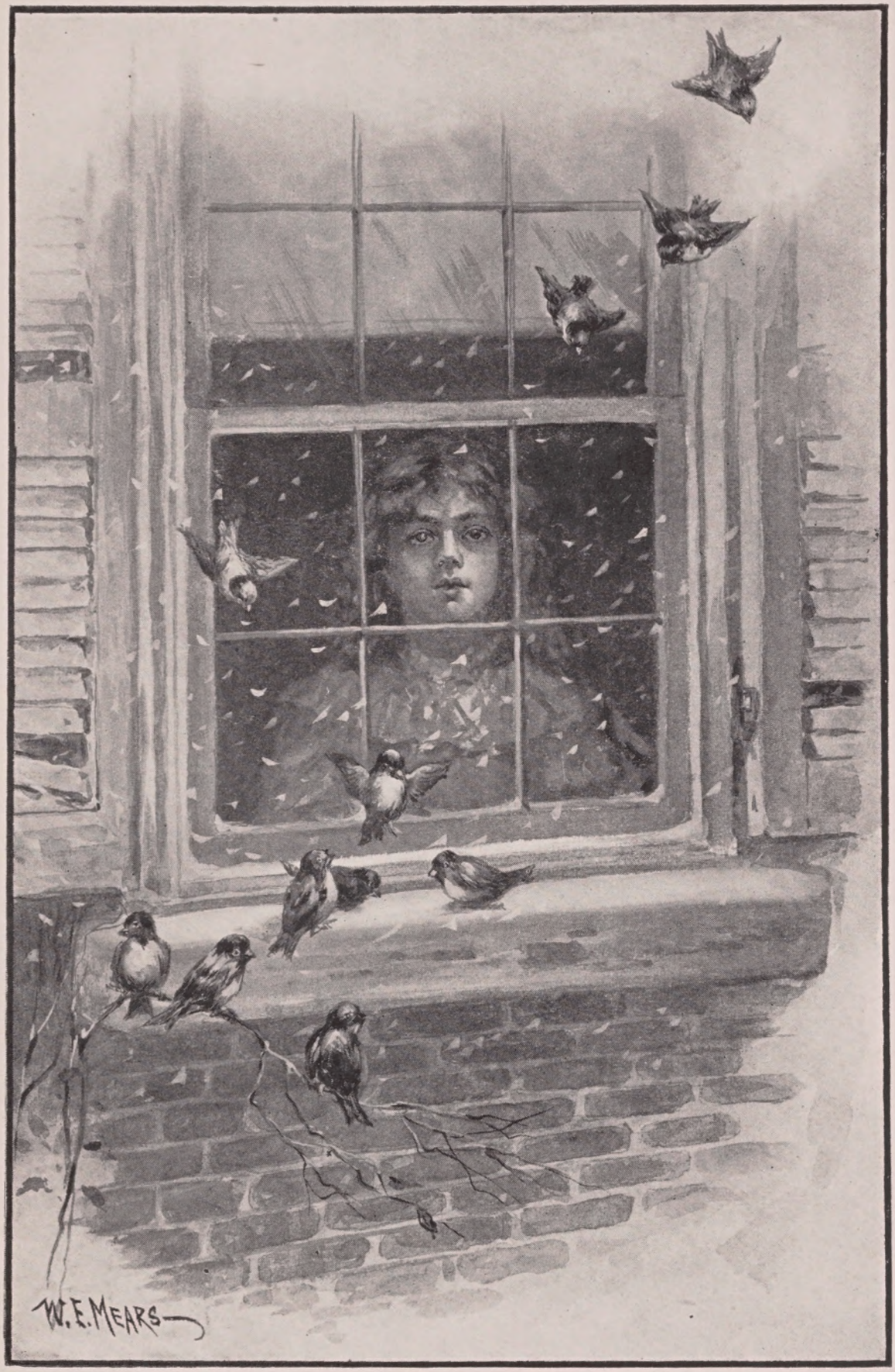
Then he lifted his finger, and in an instant the birds were all about him. People who knew no better might have thought they were tired and stopped to rest on the sidewalk just then; but that was not the way of it at all, as they would have known if they could have seen the beautiful young Santa Claus, light as a bird himself, poised smiling in the midst of them.

"Brother birds," he began, which, as it happens, was exactly the way a dear old saint, who walked about the world in a long gray cloak ever so many years ago, used to begin *his* talks to birds. That was St. Francis, you remember, and he had a way of preaching little sermons to birds and other free wild creatures whom he came across in his travels. Perhaps they understood him better than some

men and women. The real Santa Claus had known and loved St. Francis well. He never had a better helper.

"Brother birds," he began, and then he struck out into a little sermon that was quite his own. "We all know there's nothing so sweet as helping each other, and we people that have wings are the luckiest in the world, for we can be quickest in doing it. There's a poor little shut-in child looking out of that window. Fly up and give her a happy thought. Do something to cheer her."

They circled around his head for an instant, with a twitter of joy, then they flew straight up and settled on the sill of that window where the child who had no wings, nor even two free feet, was looking out so sadly. As it happened, there were seeds on the window which had fallen from a vine the wind had been shaking, and when the birds had eaten every one



THEY FLEW UP AND SETTLED ON THE SILL.

they lingered still, hopping about, chirping and lifting their wings, and the one with the rosy head turned it from side to side in the sunshine, and looked at the child with his clear, bright eyes, till the sorry look went out of hers, and she laughed with pleasure.

It was such a pretty picture that even Santa Claus lingered an instant to see it; and he was not the only one, for a poet who was passing by, heavy-hearted because he had no gift to send his friend, lifted his eyes, and the sight of the child with the crutch at her side, and the winged creatures hovering at her window, put a thought into his heart which shaped itself into tender verse that went to his friend in the morning.

And the friend, who cared more for his thought than for any costly thing he could have sent her, declared that she must see that window for herself, and presently she

found an errand to take her up to the room, and before long there was no crutch there, but a happy child set free through her help.

Santa Claus was the beginning of it all, and he fell into such a glee thinking of what would happen — for no one knows as he does how things go on when once they have started — that there was no keeping his feet to the ground as he turned away.

He went flying around the corner at such a rate that he almost ran into the portly gentleman with his head in a fur collar, who had escaped him twice before.

"Look here," said Santa Claus, pulling himself together, "this won't do! I can't go dodging around this old party any longer. By hook or crook, at some rate or other, I've got to get hold of him."

And the look that came into his eyes as he said it would have shown any one in

the least acquainted with the real Santa Claus that he meant business.

Now it happened that at that minute the portly gentleman was passing a little booth filled with Christmas greens. There were Christmas trees at the back, and the counter which stood against the sidewalk was covered with wreaths of holly, bunches of mistletoe, and heaps of feathery ground-pine, while, in the midst of all, a lively young man was calling:

"Step right up, gentlemen, step right up, ladies! Here's where you get your Christmas greens, all at the lowest prices, and everything fresh and handsome."

There was such a woodsy smell about the place that it really seemed as if one could not help stopping, if for nothing else than to take a long, deep breath; and hundreds of people did stop as they passed, many of them carrying a sprig of mistletoe or a wreath of holly as they

turned away. The portly gentleman had no notion of doing anything of the sort. He did not smell the woods nor see the greenness, but he stopped all the same before he knew it.

Whether Santa Claus had anything to do with it, or whether it was only a mischievous dog that leaped up against the counter just then, and catching at a rope of ground pine, dragged a great coil of it down on the pavement, we do not pretend to say. But one thing is certain, all at once our gentleman, who was noticing nothing and quite wrapped up in figuring on the price of some real estate he meant to buy, found his feet in a tangle of evergreen, and himself brought to a sudden halt.

"Oh, beg your pardon!—Get out, you cur!" said the young man, jumping across the counter; and he stooped down and began to unwind the feet of our friend,

whom we might as well call Mr. Worldly Wiseman as anything else. It is a very good name for him, and was carried long ago by one of his famous relatives.

Mr. Worldly Wiseman frowned a little. He did not fancy being stopped by such foolishness, and then he began to look with some curiosity at the thing that had stopped him.

"Don't you want me to send some of it up to your house?" said the young man, who had a sharp eye for business. "It 's great for decoration. Nothing like it for winding round the chandeliers and putting over the pictures, you know."

"Oh, I always leave that sort of business to the women folk; I presume they 've got some of it already," said Mr. Worldly Wiseman.

But he was beginning to look at that evergreen with a pucker about the eyes which showed he was interested.

"It 's only ten cents a yard, — throw in a yard or two extra, if you take a dollar's worth," pursued the young man, who was down on his knees, and seemed to find extraordinary difficulty in untangling the legs of his unwilling customer.

"Ten cents a yard!" ejaculated Mr. Worldly Wiseman, with a sudden start. "Did you say ten cents a yard?"

He took hold of the evergreen rope and examined it sharply. He lifted it to his nose and smelled of it. Then he asked in a tone that was almost solemn:

"Say, young man, where did this come from?"

"From back East," said the young man. "From — I believe it was from Maine."

He was making a guess at it, but oddly enough he had hit it right. (The invisible Santa Claus was standing close by him at that moment.) "It 's sort of an

evergreen country, you see, Maine is," he went on. "It 's cold as Greenland back there, and they 've got a scrubby lot of hills that are all covered with this sort of stuff."

"Young man," interrupted Mr. Worldly Wiseman, drawing himself up with dignity, "you can't give me any points on the State of Maine. I was born and brought up there. I know those hills from A to Izzard, and I know just how cold 't is too," he added, shrugging up the collar of his big fur coat.

The young man appeared to be much struck with this information. "I say!" he exclaimed, "then I should n't wonder if you 've seen this kind of evergreen growing there yourself."

"Seen it growing?" repeated Mr. Worldly Wiseman. "Well, if all I gathered when I was a boy"—

"You and Ben and Jenny, you know,"

put in Santa Claus, who was edging cautiously up to him.

"If all the ground pine that we children picked," continued Mr. Worldly Wiseman, growing impressive, "had been sold at ten cents a yard, we could have paid off the mortgage on the old farm and built a new barn into the bargain." He broke off a sprig of the feathery green and held it in his fingers. "Yes, send a dollar's worth of it up to the house," and he gave an address in the most fashionable part of town, as he laid down a big silver dollar.

Then he walked away, but he was still looking at that bit of green, and it was queer how things began to come back to him. Santa Claus was creeping closer and closer, for that strange cold atmosphere which had kept him at arm's length before was somehow beginning to melt.

"Do you remember," he whispered,

"that time when the scholars in District Number Three trimmed up the school-house for Christmas, and how you boys scoured the hills all one Saturday for this very green, and how the girls wove it together, and you all worked till after candle light trimming up the old place? My, what a bower it was when you had finished! Every crack in the walls was covered, and every desk had a wreath hanging at the side, and the ceiling overhead was a perfect network of green, with a globe as big as a bushel basket swinging from the middle."

"Yes, yes," chuckled Mr. Worldly Wiseman. "That globe was my own idea. We made it out of barrel-hoops, and I nearly broke my neck climbing up into the loft to hang it. We were proud of that old school-house, and we learned something there, too, if the desks were the clumsy old-fashioned sort, and we all

stood up in a row to spell. Those were the days when boys and girls thought they went to school to study. My eyes, what a set they were!"

Their faces came back to him in a sudden crowd, rosy-cheeked girls, in plain woollen dresses and calico aprons, and freckle-faced boys in home-made jackets and cow-hide shoes. They gathered around him, reminding him of work and play they had shared together, laughing over old jokes, and whispering old secrets, and if Mr. Worldly Wiseman had worn a thermometer on the outside of his coat, the mercury must have gone up twenty degrees in the next five minutes from the warmth that was gathering at his heart.

Santa Claus was very close to him now, and he whispered more softly than before.

"Do you remember, too, the time when you trimmed up the old farm-house? Your mother had been sick, you know,

and Jenny thought you ought to do something extra to surprise her when she came downstairs. You frosted your fingers pulling the evergreen, and don't you know how Jenny rubbed them and cried over them when you came home, and said you must wear her mittens after this, because they were thicker than yours? What a girl she was, always thinking about you boys and trying to get up nice things for you! She was the one, with your mother, that always contrived to get a little candy and a pop-corn ball into your stockings at Christmas. There was precious little money to spend, you remember."

Mr. Worldly Wiseman took another smell of the pine. Then he blew his nose. Santa Claus had him by the buttonhole now, and was talking for dear life. It was astonishing what a way he had of leading from one thing to another.

"Things have changed a good deal since those days. You boys came West long ago, but Jenny 's back in the old neighborhood still. Wonder how she 's getting along in these days. Let 's see, there are five of her children. She named the oldest boy for you. They must have a pretty close time to get along on John's salary. It 's about six hundred a year, is n't it?"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Mr. Worldly Wiseman at this point, but Santa Claus did not pause for an instant.

"I suppose she works and saves, and sits up nights to do the sewing, and somehow contrives to make things comfortable for the rest, and pretends she never wants a thing herself, just as mother used to. Say, how long is it since you 've written to Jenny? Don't you owe her a letter?"

"Owe her a letter?" Mr. Worldly Wiseman suddenly looked uncomfortable.

It had grown extremely hard for him to write any but business letters. He even sent telegrams, instead of letters, to his wife when he was away from home. But the thought of his long and multiplied indebtedness to his sister disturbed him just then, and he cleared his throat rather nervously.

"It would do her a sight of good to receive a letter from you," went on Santa Claus, who was getting things down to a fine point now, "and, by the way, while you 're about it, you might put in a check for fifty dollars."

Mr. Worldly Wiseman started, and then for a moment stood stock still. But he was mightily pleased with himself for this new idea, which had popped so suddenly into his head.

"I 'll do it!" he said, under his breath. "There never was a better sister in this world than Jenny, and it 's a shame the

L. of C.

way I 've neglected her. Wish I 'd thought of this thing in time to get the check there for Christmas, but she shall have it for New Year's, anyhow. I don't suppose she ever had fifty dollars to spend as she pleased in all her life, and I 'll see that she has it for once."

He jerked out his watch and gave a quick glance at the hands. It lacked just ten minutes of the time for the banks to close, and he went hurrying down the street at a rate which made several shrewd acquaintances whom he met think he had some important business deal to close and was anxious not to lose a second. Santa Claus was with him, fairly hugging him now, and whispering in his ear as if they had been cronies ever since they could remember.

As they went there came back to Mr. Worldly Wiseman a thousand memories of those early years when he was a

barefoot boy working from daylight to dark on a rocky New England farm. He remembered a thousand dear, unselfish deeds which those who loved him had done to make the home life sweet, in spite of all its hardships. The very hardships themselves grew slight, as he thought of them. He felt like a boy again for the lightness and tenderness in his heart.

"Zounds! I 'll make that check five hundred!" he said to himself as he burst into the bank, and when he walked out a few minutes later with a New York draft for that amount in his pocket, he looked so radiant that a sergeant of the Salvation Army, who was standing outside watching the faces of those who came and went, stepped up to him at once as the person most likely of all to make a handsome donation towards the dinner he was trying to get up for some forlorn people down in the Bottoms. And he gave it,

too. The curious fact is, that the sum he had just drawn from his bank account had made him feel richer, not poorer.

Then, oh, how the real Santa Claus laughed! He knew it was not the end of it. He knew — and he stood for a minute in the crowded street dreaming softly of the things that would happen — how the letter that would come from that far-away corner of New England, so full of surprise at the generous gift, so overflowing with love and gratitude, would stir in the heart of this new agent of his a longing such as he had not known in years, to see the old home again and the faces of kindred; how he would go when the summer came; how he would meet that namesake of his, and go fishing with him one July afternoon, and discover, as they sat on the bank of the old trout brook, the secret longing of the boy for a better schooling than the little town afforded. How the

thing would grow! Ah, how such things were always growing,— mustard seeds at first, then trees for the birds to lodge in and build the nests of love and content!

He drew a long, deep breath in the joy of it all, and then he darted across the street to help two children who were trying to find a gift for their mother, and a little later joined himself to a troop of boys and girls who were going to rehearse for a Christmas chorus, and put a fresh sweetness into the song they sang, a fresh courage into the hearts of those who were teaching them.

And so it went on and on. Was he tired in the Christmas morning, when all through the night, as all through the day, he had been busy with errands of love?

Oh, if you could have seen him when the light was breaking and the fair new day was stealing down from the tops of the mountains! There was a shining in

his eyes like the light of stars that never set, and he stretched out his arms as if he would draw all the world into his soft, warm clasp.

"I shall have every one in the end," he whispered; "they will all be working with me. And the days will belong to me, too. From New Year to New Year every day will be Christmas."

He lifted his beautiful face and listened as he stood in the stillness. A song was in the air like the song the angels sang when Christmas day was young; but more voices were singing it now, for the world was answering.

AUG 11 1903